# Performer Culture & Literature 1+2

The Victorian Compromise

Page 299

-**WORD FORMATION**. For questions 1-10, read the text. Use the word given in capitals at the end of some of the lines to form a word that fits in the gap in the same line.

The Victorian age was a complex and contradictory era: on the one hand, it was an age of progress, (1 – STABLE) **stability** and great social reforms; on the other, it was also characterised by poverty, injustice and social unrest.

The Victorians were great (2 – MORALISE) **moralisers**: they faced a large number of problems on such a scale, that they felt obliged to support certain values which offered solutions or escapes. Thus they promoted a code of values that reflected the world as they wanted it to be, not as it really was, based on (3 – duty) **duty,** hard work, respectability and charity. These values were refined by the upper and middle classes, who had political and economic power, but they were of equal application in all strata of society.

In fact, one of the most important notions throughout the 19th century was the need to work hard. The idea of being (4 – RESPECT) **respectful** distinguished the middle from the lower class. Respectability was a mixture of both morality and hypocrisy, severity and conformity to social standards. It implied the possession of good manners, the (5 – OWNER**) ownership** of a (6 – COMFORT**) comfortable** house with servants and a carriage, regular attendance at church, and (7 – CHARITY) **charitable** activity. Philanthropy was a widespread phenomenon; it addressed itself to every kind of poverty, to ‘stray children, fallen women and (8 – DRINK) **drunken** men’ and absorbed the energies of thousands of Victorians, large numbers of whom were women.

Middle-class ideals dominated Victorian family life. The family was a (9 – PATRIARCH) **patriarchal** unit where the husband represented authority and the key role of women concerned the education of children and the managing of the house. Victorian society was deeply concerned with female chastity, and single women with a child suffered the worst of society’s punishments: they were emarginated as “fallen women”. Sexuality was generally repressed in its public and private forms, and being (10 – PRUDERY) **prudish** in its most extreme manifestations led to the denunciation of nudity in art and the rejection of words with a sexual connotation from everyday vocabulary.

* **COMPLETE** the table with the correct word.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Noun** | **Adjective** | **Noun** | **Adjective** |
| Stability | Stable | Charity | Charitable |
| Duty | Dutiful | Patriarchy | Patriarchal |
| Respectability | Respectable | Chastity | Chaste |
| Comfort | Comfortable | Prudery | Prudish |

* **ANSWER** to the questions about the text.

1. Why did the Victorians feel forced to promote a strict code of values?

* The Victorians had to face a huge number of problems and this forced them to find a solution by supporting certain values which offered solutions of escapes.

1. Which social classes refined this code?

* This code was refined by the upper and middle classes, but it was widespread among all the Victorians.

1. What did the Victorian code of values consist of? In your analysis consider the following concepts:

* respectability - work -family - sex
* According to the Victorian code of values, respectability was the mixture of hypocrisy and morality that distinguished the middle from the lower class. Hard work characterised the life of every member of society; sexuality was repressed in its private and public forms and family was based on a patriarchal model, while the key role of women was to educate children and to manage the house.

1. What is the meaning of the word “compromise” when applied to the Victorian way of life?

* The association between the Victorian age and the word “complex” is mostly due to the great contradictions that characterised this historical period: on one side, it was an age of progress and social reforms, on the other injustice and poverty were widespread among common people. Indeed, the Industrial Revolution brought richness to a few and poverty to the largest part of population; it goes without saying that the consequences of this process were mostly discontent and social unrest.

The Victorian Novel

Page 300

* **ANSWER** the following questions.

1. Why was there a communion of interest between writers and readers during the Victorian age?

* The communion of opinions and interests between writers and readers during the Victorian age was mostly due to the growth in the middle classes, who were avid consumers of literature.

1. How were lots of works published?

* A lot of novels were first published in instalments in the pages of periodicals. In this way, the writer felt he was in contact with his public.

1. What did novelists want to reflect?

* Novelists aimed at reflecting social changes such as the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for democracy and the growth of towns.

1. How did they depict society?

* They depicted society as they saw it: they denounced social injustices but they critic was not radical. They just aimed at making readers aware of the evils of society.

1. How many kinds of Victorian novels do you know?

* The most important kinds of Victorian novel are social and humanitarian novels (whose main representative was Charles Dickens) and psychological novels (with the works of Emily and Charlotte Brontë.

1. What are the distinctive features of the Victorian novel?

* In the Victorian novel the voice of the narrator draws a strict distinction between what is right and what is wrong, between light and darkness. The narration often takes place in a city, the symbol of industrial civilisation and of lost identities. The plot was always very long and the creation of characters allowed writers to create a deep analysis of the characters’ inner life. Moreover, the final chapter was characterised by retribution and punishment and all the events that happened during the narration had to be justified.

Oliver wants some more

Page 303-304

* **READ** the passage and answer the questions.

1. Where does the scene take place?

* The scene takes place in a room where some poor children are fed, a “large stone hall”.

1. What is the boys’ greatest problem?

* The boys can have one porringer of gruel each and no more. The problem is that they’re all very hungry (“Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months”) and they’re afraid of asking the master for some more food.

1. What is the main event of the passage?

* The main event in the passage is Oliver Twist’s request for some more food (“Please, sir, I want some more”)

1. What are the consequences of Oliver’s request?

* After Oliver’s request, the master (“a fat, healthy man”) becomes very pale: he can’t believe to what he has just heard. Also, the members of the board seem to have a terrible reaction when they come to know what happened at the parish’ canteen (“Horror was depicted on every countenance”). At the end, Oliver is ordered into instant confinement and he will be offered “to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling” for just five pounds.
* **ANSWER** the following questions.

1. Is the narrator a voice outside or inside the novel?

* The narrator is a 3rd person, omniscient, intrusive one. He is a voice inside the novel that knows everything and tells it to the reader in order to present his own version of facts.

1. How is the story developed?

* The children are very hungry and a boy in particular, who is very tall for his age, threatens his companions saying that he is afraid he might eat the boy who sleeps next to him some night if he doesn’t have “another basin of gruel *per diem*”. So lots were cast and Oliver Twist is chosen to go to the master and ask for some more gruel. The last part of the narration is about the master’s and the board’s reaction at Oliver request and the boy’s confinement.

1. Is the description detailed of vague?

* The description id very detailed and plays on the use of grotesque (facts are exaggerated through the use of hyperbole).

1. What is the function of the narration? And that of the dialogues?

* The function of the narration is to characterise the main characters and the environment and to create an atmosphere of absurdity and deep contrast between the “long grace” and the “short commons”, between the fatness of the master and the eager eyes of the hungry boys. On the other hand, dialogues are much more short, they play on the repetition of the word “more” and they aim at underlining the incredulity of the administrators of the parish.

1. Which feelings characterise the two worlds presented in the text?

* The boys’ world is characterised by fear, misery and hunger, while the master and the board’s one is characterised by hypocrisy and, after Oliver Twist’s request, wonder.

1. What antithetical images and ideas can you find in the passage?

* The extract plays a lot on contrast: the “long grace” is in contradiction with the “short commons”, the “fat and healthy” master with Oliver, “desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery”. The two worlds of the assistants and the boys are also juxtaposed: “The assistants were paralysed with wonder,; the boys with fear”.
* **WRITE.** Does this episode merely draw attention to the conditions of poor orphans or does it call for political action? If you think it calls for political action, what action do you think it is? Write a passage about it.
* In my opinion, this passage aims at denouncing the terrible conditions of life of orphans in parishes, calling for political action. Even if the portrait of society is somehow distorted by the use of exaggeration and of grotesque, it strongly conveys the idea of injustice and contradiction that characterised many aspects of the Victorian world.

Textual analysis

The text under analysis is an extract from the second chapter of Charles Dickens’ “Oliver Twist”, a novel written between 1837 and 1839.

The first paragraph aims at introducing the situation, the characters and the scene. The narration takes place in a canteen (“the room in which the boys were fed”) described as a “large stone hall”. Right from this passage, the reader might find in the word “stone” an anticipation of the children’s difficult conditions of life, later presented by the narrator. A master with an apron stands at one side of the room and, assisted by one or two women, he ladles the gruel for the boys at meal-times. Every boy is allowed to have one porringer of gruel and no more, even if the children are literally suffering “the tortures of slow starvation”. This aspect is even more underlined by the image of the boys cleaning up the bowls with their spoons, that were almost “as large as the bowls” themselves. At line 12 another character is introduced: Oliver Twist, one of the children who receive the daily and miser porringer of gruel. He has been chosen to go to the master and ask for some more food, because a boy with “a wild and hungry eye”, who was also very tall for his age, threatened him and his companions saying that he might eat someone during the night if he doesn’t have one more porringer of food.

While the first part of the text was mostly characterised by description and narration, the second one is a mixture of narration and dialogue. Oliver Twist, after having eaten his “short common” and having prayed a “long grace”, “desperate with hunger and reckless with misery” decides to go to the master and say he wants some more food. The master’s reaction is so exaggerated to sound ridicule: his fat and healthy face turns pale at Oliver’s temerity; the assistants are paralysed with wonder and the boys with fear. Even the voice of the big man is “faint”: he didn’t expect at all such a request from a little children like Oliver. Indeed, the boy had the courage to ask him to break the rules imposed by the board of the parish and the only idea to break the schemes imposed by authority terrorises him, even if it’s for a good cause. Also, the members of the board are shocked by the fact and can believe to what they’re hearing. Oliver is immediately confined and a bill is put out of the gate of the parish, saying that everyone can have the child for just five pounds.

Exaggeration plays a very important role in this text and is most of Charles Dickens’ works. The reaction of the master and of the members of the parish at Oliver’s request, the terrible state of misery and hunger of children, everything conveys to the reader a deep sense of compassion (according to the pathetic function of the novel) and of strange and contradictory hilarity, which is due to Charles Dickens’ use of grotesque.

Victorian Education

Page 307

* **DISCUSS**. What can make learning exciting?
* Learning might be more interesting if you do it with people who share your same interests and who like the subject you’re studying, so that you can learn from them and also try to give your contribute as an element of the group.
* **LOOK** at the pictures. What aspects of Victorian education do you think they represent?
* **Picture1:** distinction between the boys’ education (who were more free to play and laugh) and the girls’ one (much more strict)
* **Picture 2:** education in a school of poor children and derision of a girl that is forced to wear donkey’s ears
* **Picture 3:** education of girls in a wealthy family.
* **Picture 4:** differences in girls’ education

The British Empire

Page 324

* **EXPLAIN** the difference between the title of “queen” and that of “empress”.
* A queen rules over a single country, while an empress rules over people belonging to different cultures and nations.
* **LOOK** at picture 1.

1. What might it suggest to someone living in Victorian Britain about the British Empire?

* The man in front of the queen is black, so the picture might suggest that the British Empire included countries very far from England, like India.

1. Queen Victoria is presenting the Bible to the man kneeling in front of her. What does this symbolise?

* It may symbolise the intention to spread/impose British culture and religion over conquered people.

British Imperial Trading Routes

Page 328-329

* **ANSWER** the following questions about British imperial trading routes.

1. How did Britain develop its imperial expansion?

* Britain developed its imperial expansion thanks to its domination of the seas.

1. What trading posts were important as gateways to the East?

* Very important trading posts to the East were the Gulf of Guinea, the Strait of Malacca, the city of Hong Kong and the Falkland Islands.

1. Why did interests in the Mediterranean develop?

* Interests in the Mediterranean developed with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which allowed a shorter way to India.

1. What else helped spread British influence?

* The development of British influence was helped by the acquisition of Cyprus, the military occupation of Egypt, the establishment of protectorates in Somalia and Aden.

Man’s Origin

## Charles Darwin

The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871)

Page 332

* **READ** the passage and find the reasons why Darwin’s conclusion will be “highly distasteful to many persons”.
* Many people might not like Darwin’s thesis because he asserts that men probably descend from an “heroic little monkey”, from a “baboon” or from “a savage who delights to torture his enemies”. Indeed, human race has risen to “the very summit of the organic scale”, but it has lowly origins.
* **MAKE** notes about the hypotheses made by Darwin about man’s ancestors.

|  |
| --- |
| **Clothes** |
| Naked and bedaubed with paint |
| **Appearance** |
| Tangled, long hair, mouths frothed with excitement |
| **Expression** |
| Wild, startled, distrustful |
| **Economy** |
| They lived o what they could catch |
| **Social organisation** |
| They had no government, and were merciless to every one not of their own small tribe |

* **WRITE** down the steps of man’s descent pointed out by the author.

1. An heroic little monkey
2. An old baboon
3. A savage

* **WRITE** down what features Darwin stresses in each stage.

1. The monkey is heroic and “braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper”
2. The old baboon, descending from the mountains, carries away his comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs
3. The savage delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practises infanticide without remorse, treats his wives life slaves, knows no decency and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.

* **READ** the last paragraph and explain:

1. What principle is implied in man’s development;

* Man has risen to the top of the organic scale because of all his good qualities; he has not been aboriginally placed there.

1. What hopes are aroused by this awareness;

* This awareness may give man hopes for a still higher future.

1. What the means to truth is.

* Only with human reason we can achieve truth, not with hopes or fears.

Textual Analysis

The text under analysis is an extract from Charles Darwin’s book “The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex”, written in 1871. It is about the evolutionist theory, according to which human beings descend from simpler and lower species.

At the beginning of the text, the main conclusion of Darwin’s work is presented very clearly: “man is descended from lowly-organised form”. This assertion may cause some dissent among people, even if there is almost no doubt that “we are descended from barbarians”. Then Darwin presents to the reader an image of some native American people (“Fuegians”) he saw dancing on the sea shore and that gave him the idea that so might have been our ancestors. Moreover, the shore on which the savages are dancing is described as “wild” and “broken”, as to underline the state of backwardness in which they live. This aspect is even more highlighted in the following lines: the description of the “Fuegians” aims at presenting the image of our ancestors Darwin had in his mind. They were naked and bedaubed with paint; their hair was long and tangles and their mouths “frothed with excitement”; their expression was wild, startled and distrustful. They had no government and had no mercy to everyone who didn’t belong to their small tribe. Words like “tangled”, “frothed” and “bedaubed” underline the natives’ brutal physical appearance, while the words “wild” (that is repeated three times in the whole text), “startled”, “distrustful”, “merciless” refer to the total lack of positive moral values and of a solid organisation the natives’ and therefore in our ancestors’ society. In the following lines the writer asserts that one would feel not shame at seeing a savage in his native land if forced to acknowledge that every human being descends from “some more humble creatures”. Then follows the description of the steps of man’s descent: every man would descend from an “heroic little monkey”, or from an “old baboon” as from a savage. The words “heroic”, “braved”, “dreaded”, “enemy”, associated with the little monkey, and the word “comrade” underline the effort and the exertion in animals’ every day’s struggle for life. Another terrible image about the barbarians, that are our very close ancestors, is presented in this part of the text: they delight in torturing their enemies, offer bloody sacrifices, practice infanticide without remorse, treat their wives like slaves, have no decency and they are “haunted in the grossest superstitions.

The image of the barbarians is in deep contrast with the positive moral qualities of the civilised human being, who doesn’t base his assertions on irrational feelings such as hope or fear, but on his reason. Indeed, human race is in continuous progress; it has risen to “the very summit of the organic scale” and it hasn’t been aboriginally placed there by anyone. Because of their low and humble origins, human beings should feel very proud of having achieved such a high result and to have gained a lot of good qualities (sympathy, benevolence, intellect) and this may give man “hopes for a still higher destiny in the distant future”.